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The Story of the Smith College Campus School

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LSS 105 – Intro to Landscape Studies

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The Story of the Smith College Campus School

A defining feature of Smith College is the residential neighborhood feel of many of the buildings. The edges of the campus visually fade into the surrounding community. Living in Lamont House on Prospect Street, I noticed the almost seamless relationship between the college residences and the neighborhood. This seemed to make sense, considering that the dormitories are called houses and they are historically rooted in a very domestic tradition, as discussed in *Imagining Utopia: Landscape Design at Smith College, 1871-1910* by Lisa Chase. What struck me as unusual was that Gill Hall (or the Campus School as it is better known) fit into the residential neighborhood aesthetic too, despite the fact that it is not and never has been residential. When I started work on this project, I decided to explore how the campus school fit into the landscape of the neighborhood, and how that has or hasn't changed over the years. I found that the further back in the history of Gill Hall I went, the more like a single family home it looked. This led me to consider the architecture of the campus school from the standpoint of residential architecture in the early 1900's, and I discovered that Gill Hall was designed using the same styles that were popular in private homes in the early 1900's.

Situated on the very edge of campus next to Talbot House and set back from the street, the front of the campus school has a very private feel. The roofline echoes that of Talbot, but on a much smaller scale. Originally, the building was a structure about the size of a house. It was a part of Capen School for Girls, a preparatory school for young women

intended to prepare girls for a Smith education. Most high schools did not offer women the level of academic rigor required to be ready for the academic intensity of the relatively new women's colleges. This left an educational gap that the Capen School filled: "part of its mission was to be a kind of P.G. school, for girls who had already completed high school, to prepare for Smith's entrance exams" (Teller). The school was run and owned by Bessie Capen until her death in 1920. Gill Hall was one of the school buildings and served as classroom space (or "Recitation Rooms" as they are called in a 1910 Sanborn Fire Insurance map of Northampton). It was sold as part of the Capen school grounds to Smith College in 1921 along with Talbot and Capen houses. While Talbot and Capen became college residences, Gill Hall became a place for education students at Smith to learn about teaching and for professors to try new ideas.

The first Gill Hall was built sometime before 1902 (the first of the Sanborn maps to show Gill Hall is the one published in that year) and was shaped like a lowercase "t" with only half of the cross stroke. In 1917, three years before the end of Capen School for Girls, Gill Hall burnt to the ground. It was redesigned and rebuilt in 1918 by the architecture firm Hartwell, Richardson & Driver of Boston. This new structure was stucco covered brick, and is the most visible part of the campus school today. The new design maintained most of the original footprint, although it did fill out the back of the building to create an "L" shaped layout and one of the entrances to the building was moved to face Prospect Street. Around the same time, the laundry and heating plant for the school, which was located behind Gill Hall fronting State Street, was expanded and the back of the building crept up the hill closer to Gill. Sometime between 1930 and 1977 there was a "later brick addition added to [the] north side" (Stroup). The building that housed the laundry and heating plant extended

further and connected to Gill Hall and became part of the school. The front of Gill remained largely the same up to the present day except for the addition of the entry ramp, which is described as a “tri-partite combination of a slight extension of the main building, a barrel vaulted gambrel roof supported by columns and a relatively recent flat wood and metal structure” in the same 1977 description of the building by Stroup as the mention of the brick addition.

The Gill Hall we know today is very different from the original. The first Gill Hall had wood shingling instead of stucco and a turret shaped structure just to the right of the main entrance. There was another entrance on the inside of the “L” shape, and a large window where the secondary entrance facing Prospect now stands. The roof was steep with a continuous slope unlike the gambrel roof of today, and there were three dormer windows facing Talbot (see figure 1, all in Images at the end). The structure that was rebuilt in 1918 is still present in the current campus school building. The difference in architecture of the brick additions to the side and back of the building seems to highlight the older structure adding to the sense of it being a part of the neighborhood. The 1918 part of the building looks very much like a house (see figure 2). In the early years, there were winding paths connecting the Campus School to Talbot and other parts of the grounds owned by Smith nearby. Some of the paths remain, but most of the area between the Campus School and Talbot is now an access drive for parents to pick up their children after school (see figure 3). Trees that were present on the grounds of Gill Hall are gone, and others have grown up to take their places. Comparing images from the early 20th century with images from this year and live observation, it seems like Gill Hall was even more integrated into the look and feel of the neighborhood before the drive was added. Now, every day when classes let out,

the line of parent cars waiting to pick up their children makes it very clear that the school is a school, not a house. The rest of the day and on the weekend, it doesn't stand out nearly as much.

While researching the ways in which the campus school building has changed, I was surprised to discover just how large the school is. Much of the building is contained within the block and hidden behind residential houses. The part of the building that lets out onto State Street looks like a house from around the same period as other apartment buildings in the area, so I never noticed that it was connected to the snaking building that makes up the campus school. The varied architectural styles in the building add to the sense of the campus school being one smaller building with several other independent structures between Gill Hall and State Street. Even the playground is walled in by the apartments on the two sides not occupied by Smith buildings so a casual passerby cannot get an unobstructed view of the entire school campus. The playground has trees providing a barrier between some of the apartment houses, and is a very large space. This means that sightlines walking past the school remain uncluttered by institutional looking buildings, and the trees help blend into the neighborhood which has many mature trees mixed in among the houses (see figures 4-6).

Hartwell, Richardson & Driver, the firm that designed the 1918 part of the building, was known for designing public schools, although they were responsible for several churches, commercial buildings, and even homes. Perhaps it should not be surprising that the part of the campus school the firm is responsible for blends into its surroundings, considering that "at least six of their high school buildings have been converted into apartments or condominiums" (World Heritage Encyclopedia). This would suggest that

their design sensibilities tended towards a more residential aesthetic. Stroup describes the architecture style used for Gill as eclectic, a classification that seems to fit. The building does not appear to draw from any one particular style common to the early 20th century, but rather many. This helps explain the residential look of the school because this was a primary architectural approach during the first half of the 20th century (Antique Home Style) for private houses. The gambrel roof is reminiscent of the Dutch Colonial Revival style also popular for homes at that time.

Through time in the archives, observing the campus school, and researching the Capen School, it became apparent that what is now the campus school has always served as an academic institution related to Smith (if not always owned by the college) while maintaining an aesthetic in harmony with the non-Smith community surrounding it. While the building has undergone significant changes from fire and expansion, the historic residential style architecture has remained prominent since the first Gill Hall, and by this point in the building's life, will likely stay so. It will be interesting to see how the visual relationship continues to evolve as the landscape of the neighborhood changes, and what aesthetic changes the campus school might undergo in another hundred years.

Images



Figure 1: Gill Hall before 1917
Photo courtesy of the Smith College Archives



Figure 2: Gill Hall after 1918
Photo courtesy of the Smith College Archives



Figure 3: Gill Hall December 2016
Photo courtesy of Dylan McBride



Figure 4: Gill Hall before 1917
Photo courtesy of the Smith College Archives



Figure 5: Gill Hall 1921
Photo courtesy of the Smith College Archives



Figure 6: Gill Hall December 2016
Photo courtesy of Dylan McBride

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